

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 17, 2020

The Honorable Alex M. Azar II
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20201

Dear Secretary Azar:

We are writing to urge that the national COVID-19 vaccine plan include strategic efforts with a public health approach to ensure the equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines to the American public, so that the highest-risk individuals are prioritized. This public health approach requires the plan to be fair and effective; prioritize those at highest risk for transmission and dying of the disease; and save the greatest number of lives.

We cannot repeat the debacle we continue to have with the distribution of tests, where even now health care providers who are risking their lives to take care of COVID-19 patients are not tested, but low-risk non-essential workers, like professional athletes, are. Where low-risk residents in affluent communities can get tests just because they came back from vacation, but higher-risk farmworkers who are working to maintain our food supply chain cannot.

It is critical that we prioritize vaccinating people who need it the most. This disease hits certain populations harder; statistics show that older people and those with underlying health conditions are at higher risk for developing severe symptoms¹, with greater infection and mortality rates among people of color.² And essential workers are risking their lives every day to protect our communities, save lives, and keep our food supply chain intact. It is critical that these higher risk individuals are prioritized to get vaccines once they become available.

We are cautiously optimistic at the current pace of vaccine development and encouraged by promising clinical trials. It is going to take hundreds of millions of vaccine doses to be effective at curbing this virus, and current projections show that we may begin vaccinating the public by the end of the year or early in 2021. Regardless of this progress, not all of those vaccine doses are going to be available at once, so difficult decisions must be made as to how to prioritize their distribution.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Symptoms of Coronavirus. Updated May 13, 2020. (www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html)

² The COVID Tracking Project at The Atlantic, The COVID Racial Data Tracker. "COVID-19 is affecting Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other people of color the most." (<https://covidtracking.com/race>) (Accessed July 27, 2020).

We cannot wait until the vaccine is ready to start thinking about vaccine distribution objectives, or scramble to create plans at the last minute, or simply give them to the highest bidder. We cannot look back in a year and see that we created additional disparities because we didn't make the conscious effort to make sure that vulnerable populations have access to vaccines, not just wealthier low-risk people in affluent zip codes. We cannot look back in a year and have to correct a mistake that we have already made. Health equity must be a priority and not an afterthought. We must plan now to ensure equitable allocation and distribution.

We urge you to aggressively and immediately pursue coordinated, strategic efforts based on science and public health expertise that puts individuals most at risk of getting infected and dying from COVID-19 at the forefront of vaccine use. We understand that both the National Academies of Medicine and the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices are beginning to examine this issue, and that those recommendations may inform your own plans—however, the broader plan remains unclear. We request further details on the Administration's national COVID-19 plan, and specifically how you intend to construct your strategic distribution efforts including the following information by August 31, 2020.

1. What are the principles that will guide your prioritization of vaccine distribution?
2. What factors are you taking into account in the formulation of the vaccine distribution plan?
3. What data sources are you using, and which experts are you consulting?
4. How will the amount, timeline, and location of distribution reflect these priorities?
5. What is your timeline to solidify a plan, and will you make that plan public or available to Congress?
6. How will you make the amount, timeline, and location of vaccine distribution transparent to the public?

Time is of the essence; these plans need to be ready to implement as soon as the first round of vaccines is available for use, and we need to ensure that those most at risk have access, regardless of where they live or how much money they make.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter, and we look forward to receiving your response.

Sincerely,



Raul Ruiz, M.D.
Member of Congress

/s/
Nanette Diaz Barragán
Member of Congress

/s/
Karen Bass
Member of Congress

/s/
Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Member of Congress

/s/
Lisa Blunt Rochester
Member of Congress

/s/
Suzanne Bonamici
Member of Congress

/s/
G.K. Butterfield
Member of Congress

/s/
Tony Cárdenas
Member of Congress

/s/
André Carson
Member of Congress

/s/
Sean Casten
Member of Congress

/s/
Kathy Castor
Member of Congress

/s/
Joaquín Castro
Member of Congress

/s/
Judy Chu
Member of Congress

/s/
Gilbert R. Cisneros Jr.
Member of Congress

/s/
Yevette D. Clarke
Member of Congress

/s/
J. Luis Correa
Member of Congress

/s/
Angie Craig
Member of Congress

/s/
Peter A. DeFazio
Member of Congress

/s/
Veronica Escobar
Member of Congress

/s/
Adriano Espaillat
Member of Congress

/s/
Bill Foster
Member of Congress

/s/
Ruben Gallego
Member of Congress

/s/
Jesús G. "Chuy" García
Member of Congress

/s/
Sylvia Garcia
Member of Congress

/s/
Jimmy Gomez
Member of Congress

/s/
Vicente Gonzalez
Member of Congress

/s/
Raúl M. Grijalva
Member of Congress

/s/
Alcee L. Hastings
Member of Congress

/s/
Denny Heck
Member of Congress

/s/
Brian Higgins
Member of Congress

/s/
Marcy Kaptur
Member of Congress

/s/
Robin L. Kelly
Member of Congress

/s/
Joseph P. Kennedy III
Member of Congress

/s/
Ro Khanna
Member of Congress

/s/
Ann Kuster
Member of Congress

/s/
John B. Larson
Member of Congress

/s/
Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

/s/
Andy Levin
Member of Congress

/s/
Tom Malinowski
Member of Congress

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James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

/s/
Gwen Moore
Member of Congress

/s/
Joseph D. Morelle
Member of Congress

/s/
Seth Moulton
Member of Congress

/s/
Grace F. Napolitano
Member of Congress

/s/
Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress

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Tom O'Halleran
Member of Congress

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Jimmy Panetta
Member of Congress

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Lucille Roybal-Allard
Member of Congress

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Bobby L. Rush
Member of Congress

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Linda T. Sánchez
Member of Congress

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John P. Sarbanes
Member of Congress

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Mary Gay Scanlon
Member of Congress

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Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

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José E. Serrano
Member of Congress

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Darren Soto
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Mark Takano
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Juan Vargas
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Filemon Vela
Member of Congress

_____/s/
Nydia Velázquez
Member of Congress

_____/s/
Peter Welch
Member of Congress